

DOUGLAS E. DISMUKES

FEBRUARY 2, 1925.—Committed to the Committee of the Whole House on the state of the Union and ordered to be printed

Mr. STEPHENS, from the Committee on Naval Affairs, submitted the following

REPORT

[To accompany H. R. 11755]

The Committee on Naval Affairs, to whom was referred the bill (H. R. 11755) limiting the provisions of the act of August 29, 1916, relating to the retirement of captains in the Navy, having had the same under consideration, report favorably thereon with the following amendments:

Strike out all after the enacting clause and insert the following:

That in recognition of his gallant and conspicuous service in bringing the United States ship Mount Vernon safely into port after that vessel was torpedoed on September 5, 1918, Capt. Douglas E. Dismukes, United States Navy, when retired in accordance with the provisions of existing law, shall be placed upon the retired list with the rank of rear admiral and with the retired pay of the lower half of that rank.

Amend the title so as to read:

For the relief of Captain Douglas E. Dismukes, United States Navy.

Capt. Douglas E. Dismukes, United States Navy was appointed to the Naval Academy in 1886 from the State of Mississippi and was graduated in 1890.

Aside from his exceptionally distinguished service during the World War, Captain Dismukes's service at sea extending over a period of 20 years has been uniformly highly commendable. In 1911 while in command of the U. S. S. *Petrel* in Central American waters he received a letter from the then Secretary of the Navy, Hon. George von L. Meyer, approving his prompt and effective service in protecting property of American citizens.

As senior officer afloat in Mexican waters in 1916 he received high praise from the Chief of Naval Operations for his sound judgment and tact. The war service of Captain Dismukes is outstanding among all captains commanding ships during the war, as was testified to by Admiral W. S. Benson, Chief of Naval Operations during the World War.

The first notable service of Captain Dismukes was in opening the harbor and approaches to Baltimore, frozen to a depth of 12 to 18 inches during the unprecedented winter of 1917-18. The War Industries Board in a telegram to the Navy Department January, 1918, requested that shipping in Baltimore harbor be released, otherwise the entire War Industries of New England would be closed for lack of coal. Captain Dismukes in command of the battleship *Kentucky*, broke through this ice and by repeated trips escorting ships to and from Chesapeake Bay to the harbor, succeeded in freeing some 50 ships locked in the ice, and opening the harbor to commerce. For this exceptional and successful service repeated congratulatory radio messages were sent to Captain Dismukes by the Navy Department and his flag officer.

From the battleship *Kentucky* Captain Dismukes was, in February, 1918, ordered to command the U. S. S. *Mount Vernon*, one of our largest and most valuable transports. His record in command of this transport is filled with commendatory letters and dispatches from Vice Admiral Gleaves, commanding transport and cruiser service, and from Admiral W. S. Benson, Chief of Naval Operations, for exceptional accomplishments. The rapidity of the voyages, the quick turnrounds in Brest and in New York, and the remarkable increase in the troop carrying capacity of the vessel were the most notable achievements. The troop capacity of the *Mount Vernon* was increased from 3,000 in February, 1918, to 6,000 at the end of the war, as the records show, largely by the initiative and efforts of Captain Dismukes, officers, and crew of the *Mount Vernon*.

The specially gallant and meritorious service of Captain Dismukes in combat with the enemy submarine whereby this valuable ship was saved to the service, together with the lives of her crew and passengers are covered by the official reports appended hereto.

The former Chief of Operations, Admiral W. S. Benson, and the commander in chief afloat during the war, Admiral H. T. Mayo, United States Navy, appeared before this committee in a public hearing and unqualifiedly testified that Captain Dismukes distinguished himself above all other captains in the Navy who commanded ships during the war.

Captain Dismukes will reach the retiring age shortly, and unless this bill is enacted into law at this session of Congress, Captain Dismukes will be retired without any recognition whatsoever for his services in battle other than the before commendations.

The committee desires to make a part of this report the testimony of Admiral W. S. Benson, Chief of Operations during the World War, Admiral Henry T. Mayo, and Admiral Albert Gleaves.

STATEMENT OF ADMIRAL W. S. BENSON

The CHAIRMAN. Admiral Benson was Chief of Naval Operations during the war time, and we will be very glad, indeed, to hear what he has to say in regard to this bill.

ADMIRAL BENSON. Mr. Chairman, I was asked about this matter, and I supposed when I was asked to come up here that there was no question but that the legislation anticipated making it absolutely sure that Captain Dismukes would reach the grade of rear admiral.

I was Chief of Naval Operations, and I remember this situation perfectly well. I remember Captain Dismukes's conduct throughout the war. To

begin with, in the early part of the war, when the harbor of Baltimore was frozen over, during the severe winter of 1917-18, Captain Dismukes was in command of the battleship *Kentucky*. Due to the peculiar location of her armor belt, we sent him to Baltimore to clear the channel and make it possible to keep the channel clear for the movement of war munitions, etc., in and out of the harbor. He went up there and performed that duty in a most commendable way. He was then later on ordered to command the *Mount Vernon*, one of our most important transports, and his service in command of that vessel was most satisfactory throughout.

As has just been related, when his vessel was attacked by a submarine, with the severe injury that she received, and with the loss of a number of men, every circumstance connected with the affair tended to create demoralization. When that happened, it turned out that his crew was in excellent control, the spirit was fine, all of which resulted in the saving of that ship, which performed splendid service later on in the transportation of troops. I want to say this was in marked contrast with several other cases. I remember being before this committee once before in regard to other officers, and one one occasion the question was asked whether the conduct of the officer stood out in such a way as to make it worth while to give it special consideration. In this case I consider that it did so stand out. It was my unfortunate experience to have to court-martial two officers, or having to have them court-martialed, because their ships were lost when, in my opinion, they should not have been lost. Captain Dismukes's conduct, notwithstanding the examples that had been set before, stood out in marked contrast to the conduct of those officers. I know that this committee and the House have attempted to do something along that line, but so far no officer has been specially rewarded, as I understand it, for World War service.

The conduct of the officer in this case stands out conspicuously. He was in command of a large ship, with a large number of American soldiers on board, whose lives were exposed to danger. In this instance, the vessel was saved and did further service. Therefore, he not only set a splendid example to the rest of the service and to the country, but, at the same time, he saved most valuable property—property which at that time was most valuable and necessary. As I said in the beginning, I am disappointed to know that the legislation that is contemplated does not make it absolutely sure that Captain Dismukes will reach the rank of rear admiral, the highest grade that he can attain in his profession. He has served almost the normal length of time on the active list. I would like to invite your special attention to the fact that, regardless of any acts for which he might have been passed over in peace time, this conduct, for which, in my opinion, he deserves the highest recognition, was in time of war. Now, I am not asking this so much for Captain Dismukes personally as I am out of regard for the prestige of the service and in the interest of building up a fine morale in the service to which I have devoted my whole life.

The CHAIRMAN. I recall very well your services as Chief of Naval Operations in that very important period from 1916 to 1920. Now, in your judgment, is this the commanding and outstanding figure among the captains who commanded ships at sea during the war?

Admiral BENSON. Yes, sir.

The CHAIRMAN. You think that he has distinguished himself above all the others?

Admiral BENSON. In my opinion, he did.

The CHAIRMAN. And if Congress is to select any one captain on any one ship during the war period and give him recognition for distinguished service, you think that captain should be Captain Dismukes?

Admiral BENSON. I do.

STATEMENT OF REAR ADMIRAL HENRY T. MAYO, UNITED STATES NAVY, RETIRED

Admiral MAYO. I am unable to add much to what has been so excellently said in regard to Captain Dismukes to-day. I thoroughly indorse everything that has been said in his behalf. I am glad to say that I know Captain Dismukes, and have known him for 20-odd years. He served with me on the same ship as watch officer. Now, it may be said that what he did while in command of the *Mount Vernon* was simply his duty, and so it was. I believe, and I think you will agree with me, that every man in the service did, or tried to

do, his duty during the war. Every man, from the chief officer in the Navy Department down to the second-class fireman in the submarine chaser or launch, tried to do his duty.

They all did their duty, but it has not been given to every man to have to do it under the stress of circumstances that would show how very efficiently he is doing his duty or how efficiently he had done his duty previous to that occasion, by reason of which efficient duty performed in the past, he was able to save that wonderful ship, the *Mount Vernon*, which had such a marvelous record in transporting troops both to and from Europe. Captain Dismukes was an efficient man as a watch officer with me, and he was efficient in his command of the *Kentucky*, and he did good work off the coast of Mexico later on.

The CHAIRMAN. You were in command of the Atlantic Fleet for how long a time?

Admiral MAYO. I was in command from June, 1916, to June, 1919. In January, 1919, it was turned into the United States Fleet.

The CHAIRMAN. You commanded the Atlantic Fleet at the time of the Mexican trouble, did you not?

Admiral MAYO. No, sir; I was in command of a division then.

The CHAIRMAN. You are now retired?

Admiral MAYO. Yes, sir; I have been retired for four years.

STATEMENT OF ADMIRAL ALBERT GLEAVES, UNITED STATES NAVY

WASHINGTON, D. C., January 28, 1925.

The CHAIRMAN HOUSE NAVAL COMMITTEE.

SIR: I greatly regret that by a misunderstanding of the place of meeting I lost the opportunity of appearing before your committee in person on the 26th instant.

Regarding the case of Captain Dismukes, I have only to state, in addition to my official letters and reports, that I heartily approve the proposal to retain him on the active list until December, 1928. Even this is altogether an inadequate recognition of his distinguished service to the country in saving the *Mount Vernon*, a vessel of great value to the Government at a critical period of the war. I believe he should be restored to his original place on the Navy list and made a rear admiral with the other members of his Naval Academy class.

It may be said that Captain Dismukes did nothing more than was to be expected of any captain in the Navy. Neither did Winslow, nor Bainbridge, nor Porter, nor Paul Jones, nor any other officer who has been successful in engaging the enemy.

It may also be objected that the passage of your bill would violate a policy of the Navy Department. It would be well to remember the sound legal maxim that law is not exact upon a subject, but leaves it open to a good man's judgment.

The enactment of this proposed legislation would foster esprit de corps, and be an incentive and encouragement to the personnel of the Navy.

Probably no other sea power in the world would suffer an officer to be demoted who has been commended by the head of the Navy, the Commander in Chief, and his force commander for conspicuous and meritorious conduct in action.

Very respectfully,

ALBERT GLEAVES,
Rear Admiral, United States Navy.

The following are some of the commendations given Captain Dismukes by the Navy Department:

[Cable dispatch]

SEPTEMBER 22, 1918.

Your report of torpedoing U. S. S. *Mount Vernon* just received. The forces under my command deplore the loss of your gallant seamen, but we hasten to congratulate you on splendid leadership and seamanship after being

struck. Conduct of captain and crew reflects a state of discipline and efficiency most gratifying. You have added a page to the service.

GLEAVES,

*Vice Admiral, United States Navy,
Commanding Transport Force.*

[Cablegram]

AMERICAN EXPEDITIONARY FORCES,
OFFICE OF THE CHIEF OF STAFF,
September 8, 1918.

MY DEAR CAPTAIN DISMUKES: I have been moved by the splendid conduct of the officers and men who saved the *Mount Vernon* that I have cabled the Secretary of the Navy and I inclose a copy of the message in the hope that its expressions may convey to you, your officers, and your men some sense of the pride our country will feel in this story of courage, loyalty, and successful daring.

With your lost comrades, you who have been mercifully saved, have added another page to the Navy's best traditions and I wish you all, my late shipmates, continued success and all good fortune in the great cause you have so nobly saved.

Cordially yours,

NEWTON D. BAKER.

[Cablegram]

For Secretary of Navy, Washington. I have just visited and viewed the *Mount Vernon*. The high-spirited morale of its men and the masterful seamanship of its captain and officers makes a stirring story of heroism that I wish all the Nation might know the splendid way in which that huge transport met and foiled the attempt to destroy it at sea. The traditions of your service are enriched by the conduct of this emergency.

NEWTON D. BAKER,
Secretary of War.

DECEMBER 14, 1918.

To: Capt. D. E. Dismukes, United States Navy, commanding U. S. S. *Mount Vernon*.

Subject: Commendation.

1. The department is in receipt of the report of the court of inquiry convened on board the U. S. S. *Mount Vernon*, September 9, 1918, to inquire into the torpedoing of that vessel on September 5, 1918. Quoted below is a portion of the opinion of the court:

"The court is further of the opinion that no further proceedings should be had against any officer or man attached to the U. S. S. *Mount Vernon* for any negligence prior to, at, and after the torpedoing; that the organization and discipline of the ship was excellent; further that the conduct of the captain, officers, and crew of the U. S. S. *Mount Vernon* from the time the ship was torpedoed until she arrived safely in port was such as to uphold the traditions of the naval service and deserving of official commendation."

2. The following comment by the force commander in letter to the cruiser and transport force is further quoted:

"The force commander considers that the saving of the ship was due to the immediate offensive on the part of the *Mount Vernon* which possibly prevented a second attack, to the judgment of the captain in continuing at best speed, which further rendered difficult a second attack, and to the immediate resolution to remain with the ship, and the courageous and efficient means taken to save her.

"The judgment, resolution, and daring exhibited on this occasion by the captain, officers, and crew are in keeping with the best traditions of the service and have saved a ship of the Navy."

3. From the findings of the court of inquiry and other reports covering the torpedoing of the vessel under your command on September 5, 1918, and

subsequent events it is evident that you not only maintained a high state of discipline amongst the officers and crew of this ship, but that you also exhibited a splendid foresight and wise judgment in placing the ship and the personnel in a state of training and readiness which could meet such an eventuality with the smallest chance of loss, and this indicates an efficiency which is of the highest order. When the attack came and you and your command were put to the great test in battle with the enemy, you met and performed your duties in a manner which was calm, courageous, and intelligent.

4. The offensive measures taken against the submarine were excellent and your skill and judgment in bringing the vessel into port after she was hit was splendid.

5. The department, therefore, highly commends you for the excellent performance of duty as mentioned above and for the manner in which you have upheld the highest traditions of the naval service when in combat with the enemy.

6. A copy of this letter will be filed with your official efficiency record.

JOSEPHUS DANIELS.

[First indorsement]

FLAGSHIP OF COMMANDER
CRUISER AND TRANSPORT FORCE
UNITED STATES ATLANTIC FLEET,
September 23, 1918.

From: Commander Cruiser and Transport Force.

To: The Secretary of the Navy

(Via Commander in Chief, United States Atlantic Fleet).

Subject: U. S. S. *Mount Vernon*—report of personnel in battle.

1. Forwarded, approved.

2. It is recommended that Capt. D. E. Dismukes, United States Navy, be commended by the Secretary of the Navy for skill and judgment in bringing the *Mount Vernon* into port after being torpedoed, and the officers and men who are herein mentioned by name receive individual letters of commendation.

3. It is further recommended that in recognition of Captain Dismukes's distinguished conduct in saving his ship that necessary steps be taken to restore him to his former number on the Navy list.

ALBERT GLEAVES.

[First indorsement]

SEPTEMBER 20, 1918.

From: Commander Cruiser and Transport Force.

To: Chief of Naval Operations.

Subject: Torpedoing of *Mount Vernon*.

1. Forwarded.

2. The precautions taken by the commanding officer prior to being torpedoed, the offensive action at the time of the torpedoing, and the daring execution of the preconceived plans for saving the ship after the torpedoing are probably responsible for the safe return of this ship to port.

3. The captain, officers, and crew are deserving of the highest praise for saving their ship and living up to the Navy's traditions at a moment requiring quick action and cool daring. They are recommended to the department for its official commendation.

ALBERT GLEAVES.

UNITED STATES NAVAL RADIO SERVICE,
September 8, 1918.

Via: Comfran Simsadus

No. 6236. My 6109, 07405 in latitude 48-52 longitude 10-39 U. S. S. *Mount Vernon*, left ship on line formation with *Agamemnon* 1,000 yards distant, speed 18 on base course, zigzagging ships having five minutes simultaneously changed course 30° to the right. Periscope was sighted 500 yards on the starboard bow and fired at. Simultaneously torpedo struck *Mount Vernon* abreast bulkhead between boiler groups 3 and 4 flooding firerooms 5, 6, 7, and 8. Heavy loss of life due to the fact that watch was being relieved.

Escort consisting of six destroyers did not sight submarine or periscope. *Mount Vernon* dropped five depth charges, destroyers dropped six. Vessel proceeded to Brest at 15 knots. Conduct of officers and crew was admirable and showed thorough training to meet such an emergency. Captain Dismukes handled situation with great skill and ability. Vessel now dock. We are investigating practicability of temporary repairs sufficient to reach the United States.

WILSON.

FLAGSHIP OF CRUISER AND TRANSPORT FORCE,
UNITED STATES ATLANTIC FLEET,
September 20, 1918.

From: Commander, Cruiser and Transport Force.

To: Cruiser and Transport Force.

Subject: Torpedoing of U. S. S. *Mount Vernon*.

1. On September 5, at about 7.37 a. m. in latitude 48-32 N., and longitude 10-39 W., the *Mount Vernon*, returning to the United States, was struck amidships on the starboard side by a torpedo fired from an enemy submarine.

2. The torpedo damaged the bulkhead between boiler groups 3 and 4, and the four after firerooms were flooded.

3. One shot was fired at and struck near the periscope, and five depth charges were released within a minute and twenty seconds after the torpedo struck. All water-tight doors had been kept closed according to custom. After being torpedoed the ship continued ahead and officers and crew set about shoring up bulkheads and confining the damage.

4. The force commander considers that the saving of the ship was due to the immediate offensive on the part of the *Mount Vernon* which, possibly, prevented a second attack; to the judgment of the captain in continuing at best speed which further rendered difficult a second attack, and to the immediate efficient means taken to save her.

5. The judgment, resolution, and daring exhibited on this occasion by the captain, officers, and crew are in keeping with the best traditions of the service and have saved a ship to the Navy.

ALBERT GLEAVES.

COPIES OF CERTAIN PAPERS RELATING TO THE TORPEDOING OF THE U. S. S.
"MOUNT VERNON"

No. 5982. Greatly regret loss men U. S. S. *Mount Vernon*. Congratulate officers, crew, and others concerned in getting her safely in port. 070707.

SIMS.

In forwarding the report of the commanding officer, U. S. S. *Mount Vernon*, the Commander United States naval forces in France added the following indorsement:

SEPTEMBER 3, 1918.

From: Commander United States Naval Forces in France.

To: Force Commander.

Subject: Report of torpedoing U. S. S. *Mount Vernon*.

1. Forwarded.

2. All the passengers on the *Mount Vernon* testify to the admirable conditions of discipline which existed on that ship and the wreckmaster who inspected her upon her arrival at Brest states that every possible precaution had been taken prior to her torpedoing to anticipate just such an accident. As noted in paragraph 16 of the commanding officer's report, the officers and men worked untiringly in placing additional shores on the bulkheads, reinforcing hatches and doors and pumping the flooded compartments. This combination of excellent discipline, foresight, and intelligent action resulted in the saving of this important vessel which under ordinary conditions would have probably been lost.

H. B. WILSON.

HEADQUARTERS AMERICAN FORCES, BREST,
September 7, 1918.

MY DEAR CAPTAIN DISMUKES: Sorrow—mingled with pride—for those who died so nobly. Congratulations on the seamanship, discipline, and courage. It was a great feat you accomplished.

Passengers whom I have seen this morning are unable to fully or fitly voice their praises of your always worthy self or of your ship's company.

The best traditions of our Navy have been lifted to a higher plane. What a fine thing it is to be an American these days!

The olive drab salutes the blue.

Faithfully yours,

GEO. H. HARRIES,

Brigadier General, United States Army.

The following is an extract from the war log of the *Mount Vernon*, Thursday, September 5, 1919:

DATA FROM CAPTAIN DISMUKES'S REPORT

At about 7.57 a. m., G. M. T., in latitude $48^{\circ} 32'$, longitude $10^{\circ} 39'$, the convoy was proceeding in line formation, *Mount Vernon* guide, with *Agamemnon* in correct position 1,000 yards on starboard beam, speed 18 knots, special zigzag, ships having five minutes previously made a 30° turn to the right. Zigzag clocks were set 13 minutes fast on G. M. T. The convoy was accompanied by an escort of six destroyers, Commander A. G. Howe, United States Navy, escort commander. Vessels of escort were distributed as per doctrine except that one destroyer was out of position astern due to temporary machinery trouble.

(The entry for this day is taken largely from Captain Dismukes's official report to the commander of United States naval forces operating in France.)

At about the time mentioned above a submarine periscope was sighted by No. 1 gun's crew and immediately afterwards by all the starboard forward lookouts, bearing 45° , distance 500 yards. No. 1 gun fired one shot at the periscope, the projectile falling close to it; the periscope remained in sight only a few seconds. Immediately afterwards, or practically at the same time, a torpedo was seen approaching the ship from a direction just forward of the beam. A few seconds later it exploded, striking the ship fairly amidships abreast the bulkhead, separating Nos. 3 and 4 groups of boilers, wrecking No. 15 boat at the davits, and breaking the strongback. The officer of the deck immediately gave full right rudder, emergency speed ahead and blew one whistle, at the same time sounding the general alarm for collision quarters. The ship had barely begun to swing when struck. From his cabin immediately under the bridge, Captain Dismukes heard the report made to the officer of the deck and rushed to the bridge, being on the ladder at the time of the explosion; he took charge and at once steadied the ship on her course.

The ship took only a slight perceptible list to the starboard with speed apparently but little reduced. As soon as the ship was struck, the after-fire control dropped a pattern of five depth charges about 6 seconds apart and the after guns fired at the submarine wake six shots in all until destroyers approached. Report from engine room made it known that the boiler groups Nos. 3 and 4 were out of commission, the four after firerooms flooded, that the engines were still running and that apparently the forward group of boilers were uninjured. Boiler stops to groups Nos. 3 and 4 were promptly shut off and every effort made to localize the damage and prevent loss of steam. Pressure dropped to 105 pounds and speed reduced to about 6 knots, due to the initial loss of pressure. The water in the boilers of groups Nos. 1 and 2 was temporarily lost, but this was remedied immediately and every possible effort made to build up the steam in the uninjured boilers. The men in the forward firerooms remained at their stations and men off watch rushed below to help with the firing, according to the collision station bill. Within half an hour the speed began to increase and within two hours 15 knots was reached and maintained thereafter until arrival in port.